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## ROBERT KENNICOTT.

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FROM THE WESTERN MONTHLY MAGAZINE, VOL. III, MARCH,  
1870, No. 15, pp. 165-172.

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By J. W. Foster.

We indite this sketch as a labor of love. We knew Robert Kennicott living; we admired the noble qualities of his heart; we appreciated the value of his scientific labors; we mourn him as one who has passed to a premature grave. The materials for this sketch, fortunately for us, are at hand. They are extracted from an elaborate memoir in Part II, Volume I of "The Transactions of the Chicago Academy of Sciences."

Kennicott was a Chicago man. In this city his memory is cherished by a wide circle of friends; the Academy is full of the fruits of his labors; and his grave is almost in sight of our temples. In this great mart of trade, through whose streets each day surges a tide of humanity made up of individuals nearly all of whom are eager, restless, and intent on gain, it is refreshing to meet with one who turns his back upon these pursuits and dedicates his life to science. Of such a nature was Kennicott—pure, loving and childlike, and ready to undergo any privation to add to the sum of human knowledge. Robert Kennicott, the son of Dr. John A. and Mary Kennicott, was born at New Orleans, November 13, 1835, and, while yet an infant, his parents moved to Illinois, and selected as their residence a tract of land about eighteen miles north of Chicago, which they christened "The Grove." This place his father, who was passionately fond of horticulture, laid out in walks, and planted with shrubbery

and flowers. The quiet beauty of the scenery and the genial hospitality dispensed by the Doctor made this a place of resort for scientific men. It was amid such surroundings that Robert grew up and received those indelible impressions which influenced his whole career in life.

In early youth his health was so delicate that it was doubtful whether he could be reared; but as he approached manhood he became lithe and sinewy, and, as proved by his subsequent career, capable of undergoing the hardships of distant and hazardous expeditions.

He early evinced a love for natural history—a love which his father, from his own pursuits, did not discourage; and to afford ample scope to prosecute these pursuits, he was, in the winter of 1852-3, sent to Cleveland, that he might avail himself of the instructions of that veteran observer, Dr. J. P. Kirtland. He could not have been more fortunate in the selection of a teacher. Dr. Kirtland yet survives,<sup>1</sup> honored and respected wherever science is cultivated. Through him young Kennicott was commended to the Smithsonian Institute, and Professors Henry and Baird, the secretary and assistant secretary of that institution, rendered him efficient assistance in all his subsequent explorations.

Returning to his home, in the summer of 1853, Robert, at the age of eighteen, entered at once on his great life work. He made collections of the fishes and reptiles of the neighborhood, "discovering," say his biographers, "many new species, and extending the geographical range of others." He assisted the late Dr. Brainard, of Chicago, in his experiments on the venom of the rattlesnake, the results of which are published in the Smithsonian Reports. The next year he joined Dr. Hoy, of Racine, eminent as an ornithologist, with whom he studied the character and habits of the birds common to the region, and particularly the insessorial birds. The summer of 1855 was devoted to making collections in natural history for

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Jared Potter Kirtland, died Cleveland, Ohio, Dec. 10, 1877.

the State Agricultural Society, and the Illinois Central Railroad Company afforded him every facility for traversing their lands and in transmitting his collections to his home. That winter he attended a course of medical lectures at Chicago, with a view of qualifying himself as a physician.

During the summer of 1856 he united with others in organizing "The Chicago Academy of Sciences," an institution in whose success he evinced ever after the warmest interest, and of whose museum he died the director. In fact, the foundation of what has now become a magnificent collection in natural history was laid by Robert Kennicott.

That fall he exhibited at the State Agricultural Fair, held at Alton, a rich collection of the fauna of the State, for which he received a prize; and during the ensuing winter he communicated to the Patent Office Report (Agricultural) a description of the mammals of the Northwest.

In the winter of 1856-7 he resumed his attendance upon a course of medical lectures; but his failing health compelled him to desist. It would seem that only in the field, under the broad canopy of heaven, breathing its pure air and studying the works of nature, could be vouchsafed to him a reasonable modicum of health.

In the spring of 1857, through the influence of Dr. Evans, he was detailed to make collections for the museum of the Northwestern University. He spent three months in Southern Illinois, and his discoveries were important. His biographers record this incident as occurring at this period of his life:

"Desirous to prove positively the existence of the poisonous serpent called water-moccasin (*Trigonocephalus Piscivorous*) in Southern Illinois he offered a reward of five dollars for the first living specimen which should be brought to him. The reward soon procured one, which settled the question. Soon

afterwards, however, a strapping 'Sucker,' as the natives of Southern Illinois are called, discovered another specimen, and not knowing that the prize had already been awarded, he managed to capture the dangerous reptile, and, bringing it in with him, claimed the five dollars. Kennicott explained that the five dollars was only offered for the first specimen, and that it had already been paid. The claimant, however, deemed himself imposed upon, and announced his intention of flogging the man of science. Kennicott at once stooped down, apparently to examine whether the specimen was really a moccasin, and then, seizing the snake just behind the head in such a manner as to be safe from being bitten himself, he held it aloft, with its body writhing in the air and its gaping jaws and forked tongue facing the enemy. Being thus master of the situation, he dared the vengeful 'Sucker' to the fight; but the latter, struck with astonishment, concluded that he had no stomach for a battle with such weapons, and quickly subsided into a fit of admiration for a man who thus dared brandish water-moccasins in his hands."

That autumn we find him visiting the region of the Red River of the North, making rich collections, which were shared by the Northwestern University and the Smithsonian Institution. On his return he arranged that portion of his collection sent to the Northwestern University, and then proceeded to the Smithsonian, where he formed, for the first time, the personal acquaintance of Professors Henry and Baird. They found him a young man of slender form, with black hair and eyes, an open and generous face, of simple habits, and with a heart that knew no guile. There was something about him which at once commanded your confidence and admitted him to your friendship. While here he embodied his observations on the serpents of North America, in a series of articles which subsequently appeared in the "Proceed-

ings of the Academy of Natural Sciences" of Philadelphia, and in the "Mexican Boundary Survey," published by the Government.

Here he was initiated into the "Megatherium Club"—so called, not because the members were a set of fossils, but because they made use of certain ululations and wurdances which they had seen practiced in the western wilds by the savages, and hence those who were so unfortunate as to reside in the neighborhood called them "wild beasts"—a society made up of young naturalists and men who were or had been attached to scientific surveys. Of the members, many are dead, and others are scattered to the four quarters of the earth; but wherever they may be, the living will recur to these meetings with the most agreeable recollections. In this club Kennicott was a bright and shining light, and no voice was more cheery than his in these gatherings, where all restraint was thrown off after the labors of the day were over.

And now, O grave and spectacled readers! as you read this passage, let not your brow contract into a frown. The nerves of no man can be maintained in a state of constant tension. There must be intervals of relaxation, when cares may be cast aside and when the social qualities may be brought into full play. Deny not to the scientific man that feast of reason and that flow of soul which, by the customs of society, are freely accorded to men engaged in other pursuits.

In 1859 Kennicott entered upon a wider field of exploration. He determined to explore and collect the fauna of the Arctic regions, with regard to which little was known apart from the researches of Sir John Richardson. The funds to defray the expenses of the expedition—Kennicott receiving nothing for himself—were contributed by the Smithsonian Institution, the Audubon Club of Chicago, and a few private individuals. The Hudson's Bay Company lent their co-operation.

Accordingly, in the spring of the year he proceeded from Chicago, by steamer, to Collingwood, on Lake Huron, thence embarked on board another steamer, which conveyed him to Fort Williams, on the northwestern shore of Lake Superior, where he found pleasant quarters. This was on the ninth of May. The ice had broken up but four days previously, but was yet solid in Dog Lake, which lay in their route. This circumstance delayed the departure of the canoes northward until the nineteenth of May, when he left Fort Williams. His escort consisted of three of the Hudson's Bay Company's canoes, bound for Lake Winnipeg. He proceeded up the Kaministiquia River, and viewed the magnificent waterfall of that stream; crossed Dog Portage, about two miles in length, over a high and hilly country; and re-embarked on Dog Lake, a pretty sheet of water about twelve miles long, with rocky shores and a number of picturesque islands, after traversing which he entered Dog River, which flows into the latter lake. At this point he remarks that he first met with the Canada jay; but we have found it common on the southern shore of Lake Superior.

The voyageurs then entered Lac des Mille Lacs, an exceedingly picturesque body of water, studded with thousands of rocky islets. While thus gliding along through these pure, cold waters, with the trained eye of a naturalist he notes the character of the vegetation, the birds of the air, and the fishes of the water.

It is well known that the isothermal lines curve abruptly to the north as they pass west of longitude 90°. This fact did not escape Kennicott. He remarks thus: "The spring appeared much more advanced as we moved westward. The few days that had passed since we left the height of land could not alone have produced the great advance in the development of vegetation observed at this point." At the head of La Riviere Maligne the voyageurs jumped the rapids, and Kennicott admired the ease with

which they managed their canoes amid the whirlpools and tumultuous waves.

They passed through Rainy Lake and entered the Lake of the Woods, which is dotted with numerous islands, low and rocky. Leaving the Lake of the Woods they entered Winnipeg River, and after twenty-four days' voyaging from Lake Superior, he reached Norway House. Lake Winnipeg is not less than two hundred miles in length, and as late as the fifteenth of June snow and ice were visible. Crossing the lake they ascend the Saskatchewan to Cumberland Lake. At Methy Portage they attained the water-shed between Lake Superior and the Arctic Ocean, which Richardson estimates at only fourteen hundred feet above the sea-level.

Reaching Fort Resolution, at the mouth of Slave River, they coasted around the southwest side of Slave River to the head of Mackenzie's River, and descended that stream to Fort Simpson, where they arrived August fifteenth. Here potatoes and barley are raised; the residents possess fine oxen and cows; but the principal meat is dried reindeer and moose. Snow begins to fall early in October and ice to drift in the stream about the middle of the month. The greatest cold ever known was  $62^{\circ}$ , and  $50^{\circ}$  is not uncommon. At this post Kennicott took up his quarters for a time, and then made a trip with two dog-trains to Fort Laird, near the base of the Rocky Mountains, two hundred and sixty miles distant, returning to Fort Simpson in March, 1860. He visited many of the neighboring posts, and as the spring approached he found congenial occupation in noting the arrival of the birds, studying their mode of nesting, and collecting their eggs. The most important observation, perhaps, in this connection, was that many of the California birds, never seen in the eastern part of the continent, resort here for their breeding places and as a summer residence. This would indicate a sinking down of the Rocky Mountains in their northern prolongation; for farther south the



snowy ranges serve as a barrier to the migration of many kinds of birds.

In the fall of 1860 Kennicott descended the Mackenzie as far as the mouth of Peel's river, latitude  $67^{\circ} 30'$ , and thence proceeded westward crossing the mountains, and arriving at Fort Yukon. Here he spent the winter and summer, chiefly employed in hunting and trapping. In August he retraced his steps to Peel's river, and then recrossed to La Pierre's house.

Let us give from out of Kennicott's journal a glimpse of Arctic life. The dog, it is well known, is absolutely necessary to man in traversing those vast and cheerless solitudes. A peculiar breed is employed.

"The original stock," says Kennicott, "has probably been some large, strong dog and they have become hardier by a very slight intermixture with Indian dogs. Of course, the best dogs are bred from, and thus at last the general stock has come to possess peculiar strength and powers of endurance.

\* \* \* My four dogs are to me treasures beyond price. They form one of the strongest and best teams of the region, and their fortunate possessor is held in much higher esteem in consequence than he would be without them. \* \* \* On a voyage, where several sleds go together, all go without stopping or unnecessary delay for from five to seven miles, when they stop to smoke and give the dogs a spell; and thus the distance is called a pipe or spell.

\* \* \* In a clear, calm, cold day, a brigade of sleds in motion presents a curious spectacle, the breath of the men and dogs forming a cloud which completely envelops and hides them; so that from a little distance, one sees only a large cloud moving along the track, out of which come queer cries of 'Scare chien mort!' 'Scare crapaud noir!' 'Marche!' 'Yeu!' 'Chah!' etc., with the occasional 'ta ta' of the whip, as loud as a pistol shot, and the call of the un-

fortunate dog that is getting his lugs warmed. \* \* \* When a voyageur gets vexed with a dog, he calls him 'black frog,' 'little black dog,' (especially if he is large and white), 'geddie,' (Indian dog), 'pig,' 'carcajou,' etc., but the expression they seem to think most severe of all is 'scare chien mort,' (d—d dead dog). A good dog is sometimes addressed as 'good man,' 'flyer,' 'the fool,' etc., and when a voyageur wishes to bestow the highest praise, he says, 'that's a dog.' "

We would like to extract his enumeration and description of the fishes of the Arctic region, but our limits forbid.

Kennicott records several instances to show to what great distances sounds are conveyed in an intensely cold atmosphere—of a dog call heard thirteen miles, and the sound of wood choppers twenty-five miles.

In the spring of 1862, Kennicott returned to Fort Simpson, where he heard news from home that required his immediate return. He accordingly set out. At Methy Portage he was so unfortunate as to lose his collection of Yukon fishes. In the latter part of August he arrived at Fort Garry, and thence passed to Pembina and St. Paul, arriving at Chicago October seventeenth. In reference to the value of these investigations, his biographers say:

"The magnitude and importance of the results of the Arctic-American expedition were now becoming very generally known and acknowledged. The collections of Mr. Kennicott—large in themselves and being rapidly increased by the contributions of his friends, the officers of the Hudson's Bay Company, whom he had inoculated with a portion of his zeal—were being distributed among specialists for study; and the reports of these workers spread before the world a store of new facts in natural history."

Kennicott offered to relinquish his portion of these collections to any institution in the city which would make suitable provision for their reception. This offer was accepted by the trustees of the Chicago Academy of Sciences; and Professor Henry, of the Smithsonian, to promote the study of natural history in the west, tendered duplicates of whatever specimens there were in the institution over which he so ably presides. To the museum thus inaugurated, Kennicott was assigned as curator, a position which was in full accordance with his tastes and pursuits. Everything seemed to concur to make the future of his life agreeable. He had made collections in natural history which would have required a lifetime to describe. He was in correspondence with scientific men in every quarter of the land, and at home he enjoyed the friendship of a large circle of intelligent and liberal-handed men, who were ready to second all his efforts in behalf of natural history; and in Professors Henry and Baird, of the Smithsonian, he had two tried and trusty friends, to whom he could freely resort for advice and instruction.

But of what avail were these advantages to the restless mind of Kennicott, when he saw a new and unexplored field spread out before him, into which he was invited to enter? They did not weigh a feather in the balance. He could have accomplished more toward establishing an enduring fame by describing what he had already collected, than by making fresh accretions to his already vast storehouse of objects, and confiding their investigation to other minds. But Kennicott had such a generous nature, had such an unselfish devotion to science, that these considerations were not allowed in the least to influence his action.

In the winter of 1864-5, the Western Union Telegraph Company resolved to send out an expedition to Alaska and Behring's Strait, to explore a route on which to establish a line of communication to reach around the

world, and knowing Kennicott's experiences in Arctic life, they tendered him a position. What made the offer more agreeable was the fact that Kennicott was allowed to select a corps of young naturalists, whose collections were to go jointly to the Smithsonian Institution and the Chicago Academy of Sciences, both of which had contributed in providing for a complete scientific outfit. Kennicott's party was composed of I. T. Rothrock, botanist; W. H. Dall, H. M. Bannister, W. H. Ellicott, Charles Pease, Ferdinand Bischoff, zoologists and geologists; and G. W. Maynard, volunteer. They sailed from New York March 21, 1856, arrived at Greytown, Nicaragua, on the thirty-first, proceeding up the San Juan river in open boats, re-embarked on the Pacific side, and arrived at San Francisco, April 25.

The delay and annoyances to which Major Kennicott—for we must now and henceforth give him his military title—was subjected, we need not dwell upon. If Colonel Bulkley, the commander of the expedition, now, after the lapse of years, can review with complacency this portion of his life, we have only to say that he is differently constituted from most men. It would be trite to quote what Shakespeare says about men dressed up with "little brief authority." Embarking at San Francisco, the party proceeded to Sitka, and on the twenty-second of August left for Norton Sound. St. Michael's (Norton Sound) is the headquarters of the Russian fur trade in the Yukon valley. A "toy" steamer, for the exploration of the river, which had been despatched at great expense around "The Horn," was found to be worthless. With an outfit ill-appointed and ill-provisioned, Kennicott was left upon that inhospitable shore, and but for the kindness of the Russian authorities, the expedition would have been incapable of moving.

On the tenth of December, Major Kennicott left for Unalakleet. He immediately commenced active operations. All hands were employed in transporting the

equipment across the portage of Nulato—the object being to ascend, with dogs and sleds, the Yukon or Kwich-pak river to its head waters, as soon as a crust had formed sufficiently strong to travel on, and failing to reach the desired point, to push on in canoes on the breaking up of the ice in the spring—a plan gallantly carried out by Captain Ketchum a year later. But these apparently well-laid plans were frustrated. March came with warm weather which thawed the crust of snow. The Yukon dogs were worthless from short rations and hard work. The whole country, verging to the starvation point, did not contain such a surplus of provisions as was necessary to fit out a single expedition.

“The Major,” using, we presume, the language of his faithful assistant, Mr. Dall, “bore bravely up under these disappointments, and set to work with his unusual energy, arranging a plan for the summer explorations under the new circumstances; and that settled, he went out, attended by an Indian or two only, on the bleak, desolate mountains of Nulato, looking for a pass to the sea coast, and gathering materials for a map of the country. The natural history work had hitherto been almost entirely neglected; this, also, was a serious disappointment to him. His sufferings, physical and mental, during the period when he was on those forbidding mountains, can be but faintly realized from a few chance words he afterwards let fall. His was the Spartan courage which suffered and gave no sign. After his return, however, he seemed to throw off, in great part, his feeling of dejection. The life-pulses of spring, beating in the vegetable and animal world, cheered and enlivened him no doubt. He began to enjoy the gradual approach of leaves, birds and salmon and thought less of the annoyances of the dreary winter season.”

There is little doubt that Major Kennicott had had such premonitions as convinced him that he would not die of a lingering disease, but that his struggle with death would be sharp, short, and decisive. At this period he moved about with a quiet air; he was not sad, but apparently grave and reflective. His instructions were couched in this significant proviso—"in case of any accident happening to me." He wrote a note to the engineer-in-chief of the expedition—as if to vindicate his name and memory with posterity—briefly recounting the obstacles he had encountered, and asservating that he had done his best to carry out the objects of the expedition. This was between four and five in the morning of the thirteenth of May.

"The sun," says Mr. Dall, "was shining brightly out of doors; and, much relieved by thus having provided for any emergency which might come to pass, he asked Ketchum, who was half-dozing on the bed, to come out and walk with him. Ketchum excused himself, as he had hardly rested from the hard work of the previous day. The Major stepped out, and, for a few moments, Ketchum heard him walking up and down in the yard outside, humming a lively voyageur's song. Tarentof afterwards related with tears in his eyes, how, passing out of the stockade to the beach, in front of the fort, where the ice-laden waters were hurrying toward the sea, the Major had nodded a "good morning," and used the Russian salutation—s' dras-dui—the last words he spoke to living man.

"About eight o'clock breakfast was put upon the table, but no one knew where the Major was. After some delay, as he did not come, they sat down; but every one felt anxious, as he was usually most punctual at the table. Directly after breakfast all dispersed in search of him, but he was not to be found. All were now seriously alarmed, and went out again

for a more careful and extended search, taking all the Indian and Esquimaux servants with them.

“Mike Lebarge and an Esquimaux lad named Lunchy, went south from the fort toward the Nulato River, along the soft muddy beach. A dark object, a few hundred yards from the fort, caught Mike’s eye. On approaching, their worst fears were more than realized. On the beach was placed the Major’s pocket-compass, and lines indicating the bearings of the various mountains in sight, drawn in the soft alluvium, showing that he had been busy in adding to his material for the map of the country around Nulato when death took him. His remains lay as he had fallen; not an emotion, not a struggle after he fell. His death had been quick and painless; as his life had been noble and generous. He lay upon his back, his arms across his breast; his hat—a black felt broad-brim—just touched his forehead with one edge, so that hardly a breath was needed to displace it. His eyes were half closed, and his face calm and peaceful.

“His body was taken up tenderly and carried into the house, and laid out. \* \* \* \* His companions were determined that his remains should not rest in the frozen earth of the Yukon Valley, but that they would afford his relatives and friends the sad consolation of laying them beneath the green turf of the State of his adoption.”

That resolve was carried out, and his remains were conveyed to “The Grove,” and there, in the presence of his family and a large circle of friends, were consigned to their last resting place. This was during one of the coldest days of January, 1867; and as the cortege moved on, the birds (particularly the black-cap titmouse) gathered in great numbers on the trees, and as the coffin was lowered into the grave, a flock of quails approached and gave forth a call—not the cheerful notes “Bob

White," so familiar to us in the bright days of spring and summer, but the plaintive note uttered when the night is coming on and the flock is to be gathered for repose—a circumstance almost ominous, as though the birds, whose habits he had studied so long, and whose song he loved so well, desired to sing a requiem over his grave.

While thus the remains of Robert Kennicott repose amid the scenes which are intimately associated with his youth and to which, when a wanderer in distant lands, his affections ever turned, there stands, at Nulato, upon the desolate shore of the Northern Pacific, a tablet and cross erected by his associates, and bearing this inscription:

To The Memory  
of  
ROBERT KENNICOTT,  
NATURALIST,  
Who died near this Place,  
May 13, 1866,  
Aged Thirty.